

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE
OFFICE OF POLITICAL RESEARCH.

OCTOBER 1975

CHINA'S "LABOR REFORM CENTERS"

Note: This Memorandum is the work of [redacted]
[redacted] consulted other offices of the Agency and other components
of the Intelligence community, which provided helpful materials and
comment, and was given especially strong support by [redacted]
[redacted] is
not now available to receive comments but such comments would be
welcomed by the Asian Communist Staff of the Office of Political
Research, [redacted]

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This inquiry into the Chinese system of corrective labor and political reeducation -- i.e., the suppression of deviant social/political behavior -- examines primarily the "Labor Reform Centers."



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PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

Of the several components of China's detention/reeducation system, the Labor Reform Centers (LRCs) -- little-known outside China -- are the largest and most important. These are set up in the form of farms (for the most part), mines, and other industrial enterprises, and are used to confine dissident members of the society, recast their thinking, and force them to contribute to economic development.

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] there are probably at least 900 LRCs in China, about the same number as the forced-labor camps in the USSR, but for a population four times as large. The total number of inmates is probably somewhere in a range of 1.8 to 7.2 million persons (for this largest component of the system), as compared with an estimate of 1.8 million persons in the Soviet camps.

Subordinated primarily to and operated primarily by the regime's public security apparatus, the LRCs -- all sources agree -- provide a harsh life for their inmates: tight security, cramped quarters and minimal accommodations, a long work-day year-round (with political indoctrination in the evenings),

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strict regulations, no privacy, and no leave. The food is adequate to sustain life, but varies with economic productivity and political responsiveness -- as do the inmates' "wages," normally 25 cents to \$1.50 per month.

Unfortunately, little can be concluded with confidence about the economic contribution of the LRC system. There is probably some profit in it, especially in the industrial centers, where prisoners with "delayed" (commutable) death sentences are used to set production standards.

The most striking feature of the system is its total politicalization. It is easy to get into an LRC, but it is hard to get out. Sentences are stiff and may be extended. The demands of reeducation are extreme. Even when these are met, the stigma remains, and many eligible for release stay on as paid employees.

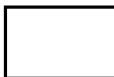
Whatever the case as regards the economic benefits, the political benefits to the regime are substantial: the LRCs do actually "reform" some portion of those who pass through them, they remove from society many others who cannot successfully be reabsorbed, and they surely act as a deterrent to undesirable behavior.

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THE SYSTEM AS A WHOLE

A system of "corrective labor institutions" was established in the first years (the 1950s) of the People's Republic of China. A great deal of public attention was paid to the system in the Chinese press and it was portrayed as an important instrument for the consolidation of the Communists' newly-acquired power. According to the Labor Reform Law of 1954 which officially sanctioned the system, "Corrective labor institutions of the Chinese People's Republic are one of the instruments of the people's democratic dictatorship, being institutions carrying out the punishment and reeducation of counterrevolutionaries and other criminal offenders."* (Labor Reform Law, []) These institutions were designed to function by the successive application of punishment and ideological cleansing, productive labor and political reeducation. To this end, as the Minister of Public Security publicly stated, a large amount of capital was expended to establish a number of agricultural and industrial centers for the detention and forced employment of political and criminal offenders. Since the late 1950s, however, when the PRC was widely criticized by international organizations, including the UN, for

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* These are not only for the common man. Chou En-lai in 1972 was reliably reported to have said that his brother had been in a "labor camp...for quite a while."

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its use of "slave labor," almost no mention of this system has appeared in the Chinese press.

The penal institutions of the PRC are composed of:

1. Detention Centers. These centers are for "temporary" housing of persons who have come under suspicion of the public security apparatus. In theory, these centers are to hold persons only while they are under investigation and, in certain cases, persons who have been sentenced to less than two years of confinement. In practice, however, some centers function as long-term jails and others for the specific punishment of persons illegally attempting to leave China. Although most detention centers are attached both physically and organizationally to the offices of the public security organs at various levels, some are located in separate facilities.

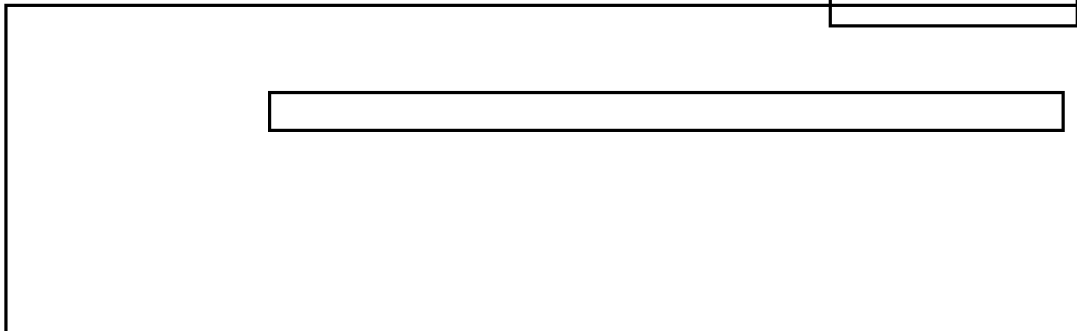
2. Prisons. Prisons are used to confine persons sentenced to life imprisonment, persons under a sentence of death whose sentences have been "delayed" (for future review, usually two years), and others who on conviction are deemed unsuitable for reform-through-labor institutions. Production tasks are often levied on these people even though they are technically not undergoing labor-reform. All identified prisons are located in large urban areas.

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3. Labor Reform Centers. These represent the largest and most important part of the detention/reeducation system, and are the principal subject of this memorandum. They are set up in the form of farms, mines, or other industrial enterprises and are used to confine dissident members of society (openly defined as "criminals"), recast their thinking, and, at the same time, contribute to the economic development of the country. Sentences range from a year or less up to confinement for life and can be (and are) changed according to the receptiveness of the individual to the educational phase of the system and his economic productivity. The majority of LRCs are located in rural areas.

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4. Reeducation-Through-Labor-Centers. Reeducation-through-labor centers, first established as a part of the "anti-rightist" campaign in 1957, are a variant of the LRCs. These centers often share facilities and staff with LRCs. Persons serving reeducation terms are, in many cases, there at the discretion of the public security apparatus, not under formal, judicial sentence. As will

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be explained later, reeducation detainees have a somewhat easier life than LRC prisoners and they do not appear to suffer the same lasting stigma.

5. Juvenile Detention Centers. According to the 1954 Labor Reform Law, a system of detention centers for juvenile offenders was to have been established. Only fragmentary materials exist on such centers. It may be that they were never incorporated into the national detention system.

SUBORDINATION OF THE SYSTEM

The different types of institutions mentioned above are parts of a coordinated system for the control and reshaping of dissident and criminal elements. The control of this system appears to be divided among two sorts of organizations.

Organizationally, the public security apparatus has had and still has a great deal of authority -- perhaps complete authority -- over the LRCs. Although a large number of reports, especially in the years before 1970, stated that the guards in the LRCs were regular troops of the PLA, not Public Security Forces, it was often reported that these troops were under the control of the public security bureaus at the provincial, county, or city level. In fact, a number of sources claim that the camps are subordinate

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to specific "labor reform departments" of the public security
bureaus; [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] indicate that
LRC guards are drawn exclusively from the ranks of public security employees and not from the PLA.

The other aspect of the subordination question originates in refugee reports that the camps are subordinate to provincial-level agricultural and land reclamation departments. Though the Labor Reform Law of 1954 stipulates that control of the LRC system was to be in the hands of the public security apparatus, it also states that the management of their industrial activities should be "under the sole direction of the financial and economic committees of the appropriate people's governments and be specifically managed by the corresponding agriculture, forestry, industrial, financial, communications, water supply, trade, and other interested agencies." The productive activities of the LRC system were to be accounted for in the national plans for production and construction. Thus it may well be that the economic plans of the LRCs come from production-oriented organs of the various levels of government while the work is actually carried out under the supervision of the public security organs. The evidence fits this hypothesis, but does not prove it.

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SIZE OF THE LRC SYSTEM

It is not possible at this time to make a firm judgment as to the total number of LRCs or LRC inmates. The 1959 NIS 39A, section 54, used the 1956 International Commission Against Concentration Camp Practices' figure of 297 known camps. The NIS listed 83 of these locations. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] have mentioned more than 110 different LRCs (obvious duplications omitted). [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] This would indicate that the number of camps may be under-reported even in the area most fully covered. A simple extrapolation of the Kwangtung Province figure of 50-plus would still result in a figure of 900-plus for the whole of China. This figure is similar to the 1,000-plus forced-labor camps known to exist in the USSR, the system on which the Chinese LRCs were initially modeled, but is, of course, for a national population four times as large. (We are not contending that the Chinese are four times less punitive than are the Russians.)

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[redacted] place the size of the camps in a range from several hundred to more than 20,000 persons. Most reports examined by this writer reflect sizes below or around 2,000-3,000, but a

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[redacted] states that the average size at that time was approximately 8,000. This larger figure may represent a swelling effect from the Cultural Revolution, since diminished, but the figures presumably rose again after the Lin Piao affair and in subsequent campaigns.

If we accept a ballpark figure of 900 camps, the total number of inmates of the LRC system would probably be somewhere between 1.8 million persons (using a low figure of 2,000 for each camp) and 7.2 million persons (using the [redacted] figure of 8,000). This tentative range of figures is for the LRC system alone and does not include other components of the penal system (but, as in the USSR, the true figure, whatever it is, probably accounts for more than half of all persons in the entire penal system); nor does it include the party and government cadres periodically sent for brief periods to the much less onerous "May 7th Schools" for reindoctrination and participation in productive labor, or the large numbers of persons in Production and Construction Corps (which are essentially militarized state

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farms), or any other persons detained or assigned against their wills. The low figure in the range -- 1.8 million persons -- is the same figure estimated for persons held in the forced-labor camps of the USSR as of 1972 [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the chances are, of course, that the low figure of the Chinese range is not the true figure, and that there are considerably more persons in China's LRCs than in the Soviet camps (with, again, the population difference to be considered).

PHYSICAL PLANT OF THE LRCs

The physical plant of an LRC varies with the role of the particular facility. While many LRCs located in urban areas make use of those prison facilities existing at the time of the Communist takeover in 1949 as quarters for industrial reform centers, the majority of LRCs are located in rural areas and are engaged in agriculture. These centers are set up along uniform lines. In general, quarters for prisoners are one-or-two-story buildings which are divided into small cells housing 10 to 20 persons each. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Cells are fitted only with double-deck bunks. Chairs, tables, etc. are not provided.

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A dim electric light which remains on all night for security is the only electricity provided. No camps are reported to have either running water or indoor plumbing. Little provision is made for heat in winter. These quarters are generally located in a compound surrounded by a masonry wall of up to 25 feet in height. The compound also often contains a mess-hall, a medical clinic, and other administrative quarters. Camps which function both as LRCs and as reeducation-through-labor centers have a separate section set off by walls and fencing to house the LRC prisoners. Housing for ex-prisoners who stay on after their sentences are finished and facilities for administrative staff and guard detachments are often located in adjacent compounds. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Watchtowers, electrified fences, moats, and patrolling guards provide security. [REDACTED]

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public security troops are used to guard prisoners on their way to and from their places of work. Only in a few "show-place" prisons such as the Peking Prison No. 1 are security measures noticeably absent.

LRC CAMP ORGANIZATION

LRCs are typically organized around a so-called "leading group" (a management group composed of inmates) and its subordinate sections:

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production, finance, education, supply, general affairs, and security. In many reported cases, the leading members of the camp organization are drawn from the ranks of either infirm or demobilized military officers. The administrative staff size varies greatly, but a reasonable estimate is about one staff member for each ten inmates. On the production side, individual facilities, whether sub-farm or mine or whatever, are organized in a descending hierarchy of brigades (chung tui), teams (fen tui), and groups. In general, from 10 to 20 persons make up a group. This corresponds closely with the typical size of LRC housing units (cells). In most cases, group (and cell) leaders are inmates chosen by the camp administration for their "correct" thinking and/or achievements in production.

LRC CAMP ROUTINE

In general, agricultural institutions maintain a 9-10 hour work day during the busy summer months and an 8-9 hour day in the slack winter season. [REDACTED] one day each week may be free during the winter; in the busy season, though, little time off is allowed. In some camps, national holidays are observed. Compulsory political indoctrination invariably follows the evening meal. This consists of more than two hours of study

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of Mao's works, the reading of People's Daily, the discussion of political campaigns, and directed criticism-self-criticism of the inmates. In industrial centers a uniform 8-9 hour work day is maintained during the entire year. [REDACTED]

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Inmates having free time for recreation or to mingle with other prisoners. All activities are strictly controlled by LRC staff or, more effectively, by peer group pressure. Informants are encouraged to come forward as a sign of their reform and dedication to the correct line. Thus, there is no freedom from the pressure of the institution. Even private moments become part of the public record. Strictly speaking, there is no private life, except in sleep.

LRC FOOD, 'WAGES', MEDICAL CARE

The basic ration granted to LRC inmates is approximately 30 catties (33 lbs.) of rice per month. This is supplemented by vegetables (often sweet potatoes) and small amounts of oil. On special occasions, such as National Day and New Year's, small rations of meat are provided. Although these rations are provided without charge to the inmates, the quantity of food is dependent on the productivity and the perceived political state of mind of the individual. [REDACTED] this allocation is made as a part of inmates' political indoctrination program and are set

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after a session of self-abasement and mutual criticism.

LRC prisoners are not paid wages for their work but a small sum of money is credited to an "account" each month. The amount of this stipend varies according to work and political outlook in the same fashion that the monthly food ration varies. Typical sums are between .5 and 3 yuan (approximately 25 cents to \$1.50) per month. This money is used by the prisoners to buy soap, sugar, writing materials, postage, and other necessities not provided by the camp administration. In some cases, inmates are required to purchase clothing from this sum.

In contrast, reeducation-through-labor prisoners are paid a wage, on a sliding grade system. These wages typically range from 18 to 26 yuan (\$9.00 to \$13.00) per month. However, these persons are forced to pay for their rations. Typical costs for food range between 8 and 16 yuan (\$4.00 and \$8.00) per month.

Almost all camps are reported to have some sort of medical clinic. These are often staffed by inmates with appropriate backgrounds in medicine. Most non-routine cases are referred to outside hospitals.

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LRC REGULATIONS

It is not known whether a uniform set of regulations governs the entire LRC system, but a number of regulations are repeatedly reported: Prisoners are not allowed to talk about the circumstances of their detainment, the sentence they are under, or any other aspects of their case. The camp cadre must be given due respect; this entails not approaching within ten feet of a cadre and speaking to cadres only with bowed head. Members of different categories (e.g., politicals, common criminals) are forbidden to converse. No foreign languages may be spoken. No borrowing, bartering, or selling of personal belongings is allowed. Strict adherence must be paid to the rules governing the sending and receiving of correspondence. No idle talk or whistling is allowed. In general, all conversation must be directed to matters of production or political indoctrination.

LRC VISITORS AND LEAVE

The matter of camp visitors is one of the most variable sides of the LRC system. In some camps, unlimited visits are allowed. In others, almost no visits are allowed. The most frequently reported situation allows one visit per month from a family member. As with other privileges, visits are dependent on the "proper"

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behavior of the inmate. Prisoners must apply to the camp administration for permission, which, in turn, sends a permit to the visitor in advance. Small quantities of food and other necessities can be brought to the prisoner.

25X1 [] that certain categories of inmates are allowed out of the LRCs on short leaves. There are, however, no reliably reported cases of labor-reform prisoners being allowed out. It is likely that a few released prisoners who have remained on at the camps are allowed short forays into nearby villages. The freedom of movement sometimes described as a part of the Chinese prison system is not a part of the labor-reform system. Physical control is tight.

ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE

Little can be discerned about the economic significance of the LRC system. In the early 1950s, Chinese officials stated that the return from the system had almost paid off the initial investment. As there are no indications that large amounts of resources have been used to modernize or expand the system since that time, it is reasonable to assume that there is a certain degree of profit from the system. Agricultural camps are for the most part quite poor, but some reports indicate that

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industrial centers may be quite profitable. [REDACTED]
that prisoners with delayed (commutable) death sentences are
used to set production standards. These persons are producing
at fast rates literally under pain of death and thus are said to
force production-quotas beyond normal limits.

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TOTAL POLITICALIZATION

The most striking feature of the labor reform system of the
PRC is the total politicalization of the penal process.

The process by which persons are detained, interrogated,
and imprisoned is of course designed to insure that anyone having
a significant political flaw -- often redefined as the party line
changes -- is exposed. There is no codification of the law, there
are no professional lawyers, and arrest is at the discretion of
the public security apparatus. No genuine defense is possible --
only confession. Lengthy periods of detention, with continuing
interrogations (reports of physical torture are rare), end only
after long personal histories are compiled which list a person's
own "crimes" as well as those of all of his friends and associates.
This process involves months and sometimes years.

So-called "trials" occur only after this "confession" is in
the hands of the public security apparatus. In some cases, no

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trial at all is held -- this is especially true in the cases of those sentenced to labor-reeducation; in other cases, only a public denunciation meeting is held, to set up an "example" for the masses.

Sentences are stiff and, in many instances, not fixed. It is not at all unusual for sentences to be altered to reflect the perceived political orientation and productivity of an inmate. No recourse exists for appealing changes (almost always increases) in sentences. Camp administration and the public security organs have a wide discretionary power over the length of sentence.

An even more directly political aspect of the LRC system can be seen in the constant political reeducation process which is the central focus of the labor-reform program. With individual categories of prisoners (counterrevolutionaries, rightists, bad elements, etc.) assembled by category, the nightly struggle meetings, periodical self-criticisms, and the constant discussion of political and production matters all highlight the particular political deviation of the individual prisoner. The fact that rations are apportioned according to political subservience and release dependent on proper political awareness also serves to place almost total emphasis on political submission. As Mao himself is recorded as saying:

What is the key to reform? Reform of men or labor reform in production, or put stress on both? Should we attach more importance to men, to things or to both? Some comrades think only things, not men, are important.

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In fact, if we do our work on men well, we shall have things as well.

(Directive on Labor Reform,
28 April 1964)

The labor reform system has a built-in backup mechanism. Not only are dissidents removed from society and reeducated, but further, when the process is finished the remaining personal stigma often serves to hinder the prisoner from returning to society as a co-equal member. Some return to their former homes, some attempt to flee China, but many (some reports say most) elect to remain on as paid employees at the LRC at which they served their sentence. These "retained workers" are paid minimal salaries and are cared for and supervised by camp officials. They are granted a limited degree of freedom, but they still fall under the general control of camp administration. The effect is to remove these formerly dissident persons from society. Although this is a voluntary arrangement, the circumstances are such that many prisoners apparently feel there is no real choice.

IN SUM

In sum, while there may or may not be significant economic benefits accruing to the state from the Labor Reform Centers, the

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political benefits, given the premises of a Communist state, are substantial. The LRCs do actually "reform" some portion of the millions who pass through them (those who have not simply outsmarted the authorities), and they remove from society many others who cannot be successfully reabsorbed but whom the regime does not wish to place in almost totally unproductive prisons or to kill. And surely the well-known existence of the LRCs serves as a deterrent to many millions more who would otherwise be insufficiently alert and obedient politically, or insufficiently productive economically, or prone to crime. From the regime's point-of-view, the LRCs are a good investment.

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